

Aftershocks in Sichuan

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At 4:41 a.m. June 5, 2008, I am awakened by a 5.3 aftershock whose epicenter is somewhere over 100 miles away. Every day there are up to 300 tremors and aftershocks. There have been over 11,000 since 2:28 pm, May 12 when the 7.9 earthquake in the Sichuan Province of China created tremors that were felt thousands of miles away in nine different countries, including India, Pakistan and Russia. Tall office buildings in Beijing, Shanghai, Bangkok and Hanoi swayed for several minutes and many were evacuated. Close to 70,000 people are dead, 374,000 injured and over 17,000 still missing.

I am in Sichuan Province for four days after having been part of a two-week delegation of educational leaders from the United States exploring collaborative opportunities with educational leaders in China. I have extended my stay to revisit schools and universities in Dujiangyan and Chengdu where I had lived and worked as an exchange scholar in 1995-96. I had initially added them to my itinerary to explore possible future relations between these institutions and my own, Northern Michigan University, but after the devastating earthquake, I also felt a strong emotional need to come and see what I might do to help both the survivors and me deal with the incredible grief and loss.

As a demonstration teacher of English in this region thirteen years ago, I had taught in several of the scores of schools and thousands of classrooms destroyed in the earthquake. I had taught some of the tens of thousands of people who had died and the hundreds of thousands who lived with the loss of classmates, teachers, neighbors, mothers, fathers or children. As a teacher and teacher of teachers for thirty-five years, I have a close bond with teachers. As a lifelong member of the human race, I feel a strong connection with my suffering brothers and sisters here. As both, I have a special love for children. Each community ruined by this earthquake and each person who lived through it have stories of terror, loss and unbearable grief mixed with occasional stories of heroism, salvation and noble sacrifice. I had come to bear witness to these stories, to come to grips with my own grief.

Yesterday when I arrived in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, I went with my friends Liming and Dennis to visit Guang Ya School in Dujiangyan where my family had lived in 1995. Liming, who is a native of Sichuan Province, came to Marquette in 1994 as an exchange scholar between Sichuan Normal University (SNU) and Northern Michigan University (NMU). While at NMU, Liming met and eventually married one of my students and a native of Marquette, Dennis Le Boeuf. Since then we have remained friends. I was mailing two boxes of books to them when the earthquake struck. She had gotten my wife a job at Guang Ya School in January 1995, six months before I was able to join them on my sabbatical as Liming's counterpart in the exchange agreement between our universities.

Dujiangyan is most famous for its still working irrigation systems built in 250 BC. This remarkable engineering accomplishment still successfully prevents flooding and provides valuable irrigation and shipping to the region. It was widely featured in the news coverage of the earthquake's devastation. Like most towns and cities in the region, it had several schools collapse, including one that trapped and killed most of its 1,000 students and teachers. Several times since the earthquake, I have gone over my notes and pictures from my visits to these schools twelve years ago, trying to come to terms with this tragedy. Today these same schools are now piles of rubble that have become tombs for their students and teachers.

Today I introduce Liming and Dennis to Jesse Irish Burnett, a Marquette native, recent NMU graduate, returning student of Chinese at Sichuan Normal University and an organizer of the Marquette-China Earthquake Relief group. Though they are living in the same guesthouse at SNU about 30 feet from one another and each had strong Chengdu-Marquette connections, they had not yet met one another. As a further connection, Jess is living in the same room two of my daughters lived in thirteen years ago and about 30 feet from my wife, son and my former apartment. These connections are on top of several others between Marquette and Chengdu that have developed over the years.

After a brief discussion, we agree to give \$500 from the Marquette-China Earthquake Relief fund to surviving children of a Yingxiu school where a former student of Liming's was teaching when the school collapsed. We call the wife of Liming's student, who is temporarily living with her fellow surviving teachers at a university in Chengdu, and then we call Zhuang Zhong ("ZZ") Lehmberg, the manager of the Marquette-China Earthquake Relief effort, to consult. They all agree it is a good idea so we set up to give the donation that afternoon.

Many of the surviving teachers are temporarily living in tents at a university across town until they can return to their community or go to another area. The surviving children from this school, who were also living in tents there, have gradually left to live with relatives or others, though hundreds of students from other schools are still here. When we arrive, we are ushered into a small plain room with chairs along the walls. Jesse and I are given the seats of honor, two wicker chairs, separated by a tea table, while the leader of the school, Tan Guoqiang, and a teacher, Li Mao, sit on either side of Liming directly opposite of us in folding chairs. The assistant head of the school sits in the corner on our side. Liming is talking in Chinese with Tan and Li. I am the only one in the room that does not speak Chinese. Every so often Liming stops to explain what is being said to me.

Yingxiu was very near the epicenter. Their school collapsed in the first seconds of the earthquake, crushing to death 20 of its 57 teachers and 260 of its 579 students. The rescue team that first entered the town of Yingxiu two days after the quake reported that they only found about 2,300 survivors of its approximately 7,000 inhabitants and that 80% of its buildings were destroyed. In their county over two-thirds of the population are dead or missing.

Li's husband was Liming's student thirty years ago in the remote mountain areas of this region. Li and he were married some years ago and were both teachers in Yingxiu. Li was saved as she was in the teachers' room in the office building and had just gotten up from correcting her students' papers when the shaking began. She fell down twice trying to get out of the building. Later when Li awoke and saw the basketball hoop above her, she realized she must be in the schoolyard. Her husband, who was taking a nap in the classroom building, never awoke. Rescue workers found him still lying on his cot several days later when they removed the tons of cement and other building material that crushed him.

Liming shows Tan and Li a text message on her cell phone that she had received from Li's husband last year. I am thinking how hard it must be for Li to see this and how it must reopen the wound of mourning. Tan and Li nod and smile in courteous appreciation of her gesture of kindness, but as Liming puts her phone away and continues to talk, Li looks down at the floor and shields her eyes with her hand. Her face begins to show the subtle signs of trying to wrestle down the overpowering force that threatens to crush her. I imagine one part of her wants to go on, to let it be, to get over it, to say enough already, to believe there is nothing to be gained by wallowing in what cannot be changed, to be strong and brave, to believe that tomorrow will be a better day. I imagine an equally strong part of her wants to be free to let all the feelings and trauma out without fear of judgment, to wring every ounce of sorrow from her being without restraint, to release the tears and sobs bound up inside her without fear of repercussions and to find solace in her grief without feeling guilt.

As I watch her struggle with her pain and try to imagine her anguish, I feel myself being overpowered by mine. How can one bear witness to such loss and not be overwhelmed by sadness? As my eyes well up and my nose begins to run, I feel the fault line between my inner emotions and my outer being slipping. I cover my face with my hand in an attempt to contain the tremors that are coming to the surface. Though the emotional part of me wants to let the pressure that has built up inside me slip out, my physical body tries to remain unmoved. My lips and breathing alternately tighten and relax trying to contain the heartache I am masking, while at the same time trying to discharge some of the tremendous stress that has built up inside me. Though I know I cannot and should not mollify the genuine sorrow I feel inside, I press on trying to resist it. The force is too strong and a weak point in the surface fractures opens. My body trembles as the structures I have created to protect me from feeling and expressing my feelings break down and collapse. I cry, and then sob with waves of grief.

I cry for the father who lost his daughter, the wife who lost her husband, the child who lost his parents and those who lost everything. I cry for every lost child I touched and smiled at, and who touched me and smiled at me. I cry for every child who lives lost in a state of misery and grief. I cry for my own father and my sister who I lost through death. I cry for the marriage and loves I have lost. I cry for my house that burned down when I was nine in which everything was lost. I cry for the dreams and hopes that I have lost. I cry for a lost world that suffers on thoughtlessly and needlessly. I cry, because I, like the Chinese, was raised to be strong, to endure hardship, to keep a stiff upper lip, to carry on in the face of difficulties, to hide your hurt, to stuff it inside

and to nobly bear your pain and suffering in silence. I cry now because I did not cry then when I thought to do so was a sign of weakness. I cry because they, like me in the past, cannot. And because of all of that, I cry harder and deeper.

As the waves of emotion subside, having spent themselves and pacified the hurt that pressed inside, I feel Jesse's hand on my shoulder. I know he and the others must be feeling helpless to succor me, but I am so lost in my own grief that until now have not thought of it. His act of kindness and thoughtfulness causes the colliding plates of my inner and outer being to shift once more and frees another wave of pain that moves outward from its epicenter.

I have suffered no physical loss or pain because of this earthquake, whereas the survivors of this school had suffered both. Many have lost everything—their homes, possessions, families, students, colleagues, friends and community. They dug out the survivors and the dead with their bare hands. They went days without sleep, shelter, food or drink. They are homeless and hopeless. Not only have I not experienced what they have gone through, I cannot even imagine it, and to the extent that I can, I cannot bear it. I weep for how much I have been given and how little I have done. I weep for all the past pains and losses that I have yet to reconcile and grieve. I weep for all the suffering we inflict upon others and ourselves, and I weep for all that we could do and have done, but have chosen to leave undone.

Tan is 48 years old, but looks much older. Li says he has aged ten years in the last twenty days. He was in the school office building at 2:28 pm. As he rushed out, he saw the school classroom building collapsing on his children.

He cried out across the schoolyard, "My children, my children! I am sorry, I am so sorry!"

He spent the next three days without sleeping, digging through the rubble with his hands trying to save his children. They found 57 alive and three days later, when the rescue teams arrived on foot over the roads blocked by landslides, they found seven more. A young girl who was trapped under a concrete slab from the knees down for three days, until help could be gotten to move it, encouraged those who cared for her to help others in greater need. She later had her legs amputated from the knees down. Another girl had to have her leg cut off with a serrated knife to free her and save her life. The man who cut it off has nightmares every night. Many children who survived lost limbs. Many will be crippled the rest of their lives.

Tan also lost his mother and his wife, but first tried to save the children before he went to find them. Twenty of the twenty-seven teachers in the school lost an immediate family member in the devastation. No teacher under 30 years old survived. All of the students and teachers from the first floor and the students having physical education in the schoolyard survived. Many of the students on the second floor, some on the third and a few on the fourth also survived, but none of the teachers. They had all stayed behind to try to save their children. Had they not, surely many of them would have survived as well. One teacher died shielding two students he saved with his

body. When they uncovered him three days later, his hardened arms were wrapped so tightly around the two students that they had to cut them off to free the students.

Liming briefly and with little emotion shares these stories with me. With each story I am overwhelmed with the loss and suffering which they bear with such resolve. With each story I find my soul crying out for some solace for them and for me. I look into their eyes trying to convey my love of and sorrow for them. They show little emotion. Have they drained their well of sorrow dry or do they dare not give expression to it?

Tan apologizes that the school cannot officially stamp the receipt for our contribution, as it has been lost in the school. They give us a handwritten note in Chinese that thanks us and indicates the money will be used for the benefit of the needs of the 256 surviving children. This contribution and the gifts I have brought in addition seem so paltry; compared to their suffering and needs, they are paltry. The bright pink NMU tee shirt I give to Li seems out of place, so bright and cheery. I give Tan a fancy School of Education NMU folder, pen and decorative lapel pin along with my business card, the same gift I had given to Ministers, Presidents, Deans and Heads of Education earlier in my trip. It also seems out of place and inappropriate. I asked that an NMU bag full of toiletries, sewing kits, toothbrushes, slippers and other items I had collected along the way from the four- and five-star hotels I was staying in, along with a few personal effects, be distributed among the other teachers. Earlier in the day, I had thought to get a photo of us giving these gifts to show to the community of donors back home, but now it seems crass.

The next morning I am a platform guest at a special graduation ceremony for select poor rural female teachers in Sichuan province who had the opportunity to pursue higher education through the generosity of a local education leader and philanthropist. They come from remote towns in the region, some from schools and homes destroyed in the earthquake. They may have been students or teachers in one of the hundred schools I taught in twelve years ago. I share my genuine love and hope for them and their profession. My voice wavers as I try to restrain my heartache for their suffering while I at the same time trying to give some authentic expression to my sympathy and sorrow.

Later the graduates take the stage and we go into the audience while they present a program of songs, poetry and thanks for the opportunity they have been given. Parts of the program remembered those lost in the earthquake. Though I cannot understand the Chinese, I understand the emotion as they give expression to the hurt. One teacher cries openly while the others sing.

I cannot look into the faces of these teachers or the faces of the children I see without thinking about the thousands of teachers and children just like them who are not here today. I fight back the tears and anguish. How many bright, friendly, shining and hopeful faces like these were crushed on that day? How many others are mourning their loss?

After the ceremonial luncheon with regional dignitaries, Liming and I go back to see the Yingxiu teachers one more time. Several of these teachers are waiting on the curb with their backpacks for a bus that will take them back to Yingxiu to begin rebuilding. We leave my clothes and suitcase along with some money for each of the 27 surviving teachers.

Like the aftershock I felt this morning, the coming together of their world of suffering with my world of privilege has wakened me from my half-sleep of detachment and denial. An earthquake on the opposite side of the globe has shaken my bed of comfort in the United States. The fault line between our worlds has slipped, fractured, shuddered and quaked. The structures I have built to deal with life's changes and chances have been shaken.

Scientists say the aftershocks from an earthquake of this magnitude will be strong, frequent and last a long time. I expect I will have similar aftershocks in me as well. They also say that although major earthquakes immediate effects may be devastating, in the long term, earthquakes are good for life on earth, and will eventually renew and recycle the planet. Though I may not see it now, I expect the effects of my suffering will eventually be renewing as well.

May the efforts of those people around the world who have given so selflessly to aid the victims of this disaster, including the children and community of Marquette, be part of that renewing and revitalizing process that moves us closer to the realization that the earth is but one country of which we are all citizens. And may each of us do something every day to make our home a better place for all of us to live.